

DEVOTION SATURDAY AT SYNOD 8TH AUGUST, 2015

Matt. 16:13-20

I want us to think this morning about ways in which we limit our understanding of the Church. I have two things that I want us to consider.

The first is that we limit our understanding of what the Church is all about.

English pastor J John talks about “What a pastor does”. I was deeply touched by it. For those who haven’t seen it, here is his explanation of the Church:

“I work for a global enterprise. We’ve got outlets in nearly every country of the world. We’ve got hospitals, and hospices and homeless shelters, we do marriage work, we’ve got orphanages, we’ve got feeding programmes, educational programmes, we do all sorts of justice and reconciliation things; basically we look after people from birth to death and we deal in the area of behavioural alteration.... Not only is it global, it is intergalactic because it includes everyone who has gone before us. It is called the Church.”

Brilliant, yes? I’m sure that you could add many things to his list -

Take a couple of minutes to talk with your neighbour about what else the Church does.

We work with refugees and migrants, with addicts and development programmes; we run universities, school, kindergarten and preschool care; medical centres and nursing stations, we pray, we worship, we preach, we read and listen to the word of God. We remember, we give thanks, we work had to be like Jesus.

It is good to remember just what the Church actually does. It is the world’s biggest carer of people. It offers hope, love and faith to billions. Sometimes Christians forget this fact, and we bring the Church down to just their own worshipping congregation or denomination, and to their own theological outlook.

The fact is that the Church is bigger than anything we can imagine, and touches lives in ways and places we can know nothing about. In these multitudes of ways, the Gospel of Christ is being made known to the people of the world.

The second thing I want us to think about is just who we welcome, who really is welcome, in our local Churches and who we might turn our noses up at if they entered the Church.

Turn to your neighbour again and talk for a minute or so, about who might not be welcome in your local Church. Be realistic and blatantly honest. If your answer is “everyone”, ask yourselves whether you really, truly, mean that.

I found something like this on a Church door recently, and I’ve played with it a bit.

“We extend a special welcome to those who are married, single, divorced, straight or gay, who speak English like a native, or who have no English at all; to those who are new-born, or old and decrepit; who are filthy rich, or dirt poor; skinny as a rake, or could do with losing the odd kilogramme.

“We welcome you if you sing like Andre Bocelli, or more like our minister who can’t even carry a note in his wallet. You are welcome if you are just browsing, just woke up, just got out of jail, are sleepwalking, or ended up in the wrong place. We don’t care if you are more papist than the Pope; if you haven’t set foot in a church since baby’s baptism or if you think infant baptism is the devil’s work.

“We welcome you if you are over sixty but are still struggling to grow up; or if you are a teenager whose parents think you are

growing up too fast for your own good. We welcome you if you are a soccer mum or rugby dad, starving artist or successful entrepreneur, tree hugger, latte-sipper, vegan or junk food fanatic. “We welcome you if you are in recovery or totally addicted; if you are down in the dumps, or over-excited; depressed or on a roll; if you are inked, pierced or both.

“If you blew all your offering money at the casino or races, or if you haven’t got any money anyway, you are still welcome. If you believe the earth is flat or the centre of the universe; or if you work too hard or don’t work at all, if you can’t read, write or spell, even if you smell, you are welcome here.

“If you are a religious fanatic, or someone who hates organised religion; if you “had religion shoved down your throat as a kid”, or if you could use a prayer right now; if you are a seeker, a sinner, a doubter, a sceptic or an atheist; if you are simply a tourist having a look around the building; if you got lost in traffic and ended up here by mistake; or if you are here because you are staying with grandma and didn’t feel it right to say no, then welcome.

“In fact, it actually doesn’t matter who you are or what your reason for being here is. The simple reality is, YOU ARE WELCOME IN THIS PLACE. We have all been in some of these places, too. May you be blessed for being here, and may you find something special as you do. Who knows, you may be touched by God today.”